

Beauty and the Beast

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Source: *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 52, No. 2, War (Spring, 1994), pp. 209-218

Published by: Antioch Review Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4612936>

Accessed: 18-09-2016 02:11 UTC

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Beauty and the Beast

BY CHRISTOPHER MERRILL

Midway through the first War Congress of the Writers' Association of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the lights went out. The unheated meeting room of the Sarajevo Holiday Inn was plunged into darkness; sixty poets, writers, government officials, and local journalists filed into the upstairs lobby, where windows provided some natural light. Within minutes the generator was running again, but the message was clear: despite extensive public and private support, this gathering was not exempted from the hardships afflicting all Sarajevans.

October 1993. The siege of Sarajevo was now in its eighteenth month. Ten thousand people had lost their lives (including at least two thousand children), tens of thousands more had been wounded, and untold millions of dollars worth of damage had been done. Military forces from the self-styled Serbian Republic had encircled Sarajevo, raining down shells and snipers' bullets on innocent men, women, and children, cutting off the city's electricity, gas, and water lines. For food Sarajevans depended upon relief operations and the black market. It was a desperate situation.

This was my second trip in six months to the city that for so long had been a symbol of possibility—a multiethnic beacon in a sea of anger. Despair at the West's refusal to intervene and thus put an end to the slaughter had replaced whatever optimism I had found on my first journey to Sarajevo. UN peacekeepers and NATO warplanes flying overhead continued to monitor the destruction of this multiconfessional and trading crossroads; diplomats from the UN, the European Community, and the United States conducted round after round of futile negotiations with the so-called warring factions; journalists documented more savagery; the world kept on watching in horror. What was to be done?

Sarajevans carried on, determined to live in a normal fashion. They went to market, cafés, and beauty parlors. A daily newspaper was

printed, which included dispatches from around the world. A beauty pageant, a film festival, and art exhibits were organized. Although many of the books in the city, like the trees that had once lined the streets, had been burned for fuel, and the library had been destroyed, schools opened and classes were held at the university. A professor of American literature started a weekly radio program featuring country-western music, believing that this was the best way to promote the American values he discovered in the lyrics of Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash—freedom, democracy, independence. Sarajevans did not want their city to die.

The War Congress was another stay against the confusion of the Serbian siege and the West's failure to alleviate the suffering in Bosnia. This event was in the tradition of the War Congress poets and writers had attended during the Spanish Civil War, and it was a very formal affair. After a girls' choir sang a new patriotic hymn, there was a moment of silence for the dead, then greetings from a host of dignitaries, including President Alija Izetbegović, General Jovan Divjak, and Goran Simić, a poet and representative of the Serbian Cultural Center. Nedžad Ibrišimović, president of the Writers' Association, joked: "Before the war in Yugoslavia there were more writers here than in China—that was the problem!"

He continued in a more serious vein: "We used to have the Sarajevo Days of Poetry here. For decades poets and writers came here from all around the world. Except for Susan Sontag, no one has come or spoken out—why?" The world's indifference notwithstanding, Ibrišimović listed ten books written and published during the war: a testament, as the declaration issued by the congress declared, "that the writer and his work are the lights in the darkness of civilization's changes."

Tvrtko Kulenović, president of Bosnia-Herzegovina's PEN Club and a professor of comparative literature at the University of Sarajevo, read a fragment from his new book on urbicide. "The Trojan War, too," he reminded the audience, "was an act of genocide and urbicide." The difference between genocide and urbicide? In genocide you kill those you do not like, in urbicide you do not discriminate: you destroy everything." Like most people in the room, he had lost everything: his mother was killed at the beginning of the siege, his wife six months ago.

"What is nationality to a poet?" asked Ivan Kordić, the author of ten collections of poetry. "A dead Croatian poet, a dead Muslim, a dead

Serb—they're just poets." And while Serbian shells fell outside—the front was only one hundred and fifty meters from the Holiday Inn—Marko Vesović read a comic poem in which his former colleagues, the Serbian poets and writers now ensconced in Pale (the capital of Republika Srpska), were writing Serbian poems with Serbian pencils on Serbian paper. Their subject? Serbian birds, which fly higher than other birds.

The diesel for the generator was running low. The Congress therefore skipped some of the sixteen texts prepared on a writer's relationship to his homeland. Ferida Duraković, a striking young poet who had recently appeared on an ABC *Nightline* special about Sarajevo, read the declaration of the Writers' Association, asserting that "the writer exists to face evil." Determined to "restore power to the word," despite the fact that in this war "the barbarians have destroyed libraries, cultural monuments, everything made out of words," the writers vowed—once again—to make the Bosnian language "their only homeland."

After a brief reception, Ferida, Goran Simić, and I walked out into the sunlight. Halfway across the wasteland next to the Holiday Inn, Ferida stopped and said, "Since the war began, we've learned to treasure every meal, every conversation, every poem we read or write, because we know it may very well be our last." She stretched her arms above her, murmuring, "I just want to feel the sun on my body." We were in plain sight of snipers, and I wanted to get across the wasteland to the shelter of the neighboring buildings. But Goran and Ferida preferred the sunlight: a miserable winter, they said, was just around the corner. They were no longer afraid of dying. Indeed, as we walked through the streets of Sarajevo and shots rang out all around us, Goran and Ferida did not even flinch.

"If you hear the shot," said Goran, "you're still alive."

In the center of town we climbed up four flights of stairs to Goran's flat, where his wife, Amela, and their two children were entertaining an elderly Austrian diplomat. The fire burning in the wood stove was fed with feathery bits of roots hacked from the earth. Through the afternoon and evening we drank Serbian brandy—bought on the black market for one hundred German marks—and talked about the ways in which the siege had changed their lives and work. Ferida said: "Before the war I didn't really like Goran's poetry: it was too hermetic. But now it's so clear and direct. Now he only writes about what's important."

Our dinner was a thin vegetable soup, and when the brandy was

gone, Goran brought out a bottle of vodka he had been saving for months. By candlelight we ate and drank, joked and laughed. At any moment, we knew, a shell could come crashing through the roof. But in that light we did not dwell on death. We discussed, instead, the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and St.-John Perse, Czeslaw Milosz and Zbigniew Herbert.

The diplomat was explaining why Vaclav Havel had not been able to attend the War Congress. "Havel the president of the Czech Republic is not as free as Havel the writer," he said. "That's a choice he made. You may not like it or understand it, but that's the way of the world. He is no longer free to do what he likes."

Ferida whispered to me, "I hate all politicians. They speak such bullshit. They're the ones who got us into this mess."

She looked around the darkening room. "I don't want to talk about all the horrors with you," she sighed. "I can tell that to journalists any time. With you I just want to talk about poetry and life. What else is there?"

Here are some of the poems Ferida and Goran have written since the war began. The translations are by Amela Simić.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

by Ferida Duraković

The dishonest Beauty
Slammed the door
Finally
As the Homeland did,
Then vanished
Into History.

The Beauty, therefore,
The dishonest one,
And the Homeland
Have something in common:
Both leave behind
The boys
Who will die
For them.

THE APPRENTICE

by Goran Simić

I have spent half of my life looking for a vocabulary of beauty
which will exceed the strange love of stupid paper and a smart pencil.
I have acquired knowledge from shadows, I have learned from monuments,
I have associated with ghosts.

Now, when I spend more time
at funerals than at my desk, I notice how the covers of my books
of fairy tales burn quite appropriately while on the frozen stove I try
to warm up the tea for my sick child. And how beauty returns to me
through the ruddy cheeks of my boy and the linden flower I could have never
supposed to be more beautiful than a rose.

NOVEMBER, RAGING THROUGH
THE ROOMS

by Ferida Duraković

At last: alone. Her, and darkness in the interior
of things. Little Negroes tap and clack from old wardrobes.
While the darkness works, she would like
to sleep. To dream, perhaps? Oh, no! Rise, sister, there are
letters to be written. Darkness is only
mere absence of light. Let the darkness work for us.
It will tire before dawn. I am here, too,
seated in myself as in a chair, and it is not hard.
I was taught: to plow
 to dig
 to write and embroider
 by myself on myself
and to produce no miracles with my eyes!
Things tell me what has happened to my dear ones:
a chair moves in the dark—one among us left;
a book falls from the shelf—there they are,
raging through the rooms;
the floor cracks—older boys run away from home
for a walk....
Counting up—my counting out.... Count on yourself.
There is a switch on the left of your hearing:
let's call it light, sister.

IMAGINATION LOST

by Goran Simić

God,
my imagination is wearing out. My fervor is fading and acid
is eating me up from day to day. Now old blunders replace the old ones
just as last year's parasols are being marked by the same wind
with the initials of the north. Someone is coming out of nowhere again
and I begin to remember the summers only by dirty skin. God,
the silence that flatters my voice is growing and I resemble
my reflection in the mirror more and more.
I still pass through the walls but I wake up with bruises,
my fingers reach for the sky but under my fingernails I discover mud;
when I wish I were there I leave quickly but my return lasts longer
because I have run out of questions. My imagination is wearing out and
I do not see myself in the moist fish eyes anymore while I dive
towards something promised to me but I do not know what it is.
Your order of things puzzles me more and more because I saw myself
standing in the same line I had been in a thousand times. And I see
your bewilderment while you shorten my old man's walking stick
and watching me eye to eye ask yourself: how come I have so many
answers to a question you haven't even thought of?
And I see you with a saw on your shoulder as you leave for the forest
despising the man whose imagination is vanishing like hoarfrost
from a tree you are approaching. My God.

PAPER TEA

by Ferida Duraković

Not something to die of: to wait
for the night to descend, gathered within
like a family in a room.
Real people die of something else!
On the banks, in the fields, in a jungle—
of water, of lightning, of a tiger.

And you—you'd like to drop down dead from the flash
of a tiger's skin in the darkness!
Nicely, and quietly, with no blood and no screaming.
Just like in books,
as on the wing of the Snow Queen.

But wait a bit. The summer night will descend,
on the city and things, and on us.
We'll drown sorrowfully by sleep.

You'll wake up like dust on your desk.
Yet the better ones will die of something else:
on the banks, in the fields, in a jungle—
of water, of lightning, of a tiger....

(tr. Mario Suško)

THE ARRIVAL OF THE WOLF

by Goran Simić

Welcome wolf among our bloodthirsty sheep all smiling at you just to show their teeth. Do not be confused by the greasy dish towels you see in place of flags. Many conquerors have passed through this town and none has yet succeeded in leaving his mark. This is the time of chaos and roses smelling of skin. It is dark in the corridors you sneak down and the marble has eyes clearer than yours and it will see beautiful women collecting your hairs for their souvenir albums. Your gums glare like medals at celebrations and the mirror does not tell you that you leave a deer trail behind which you sniff and follow through the herbariums of this town below the decaying stars.

Welcome wolf with those
funny jaws. Our bloodthirsty sheep smile at you
from hotel windows for you are not the wolf one fears.
You are just a shadow of the one following you. Someone winds
the clock after you and wakes up the moment you fall asleep
hurrying to seal the windows
through which you could see the forest. Mice will eat
your documents because they do not care for anything. Neither for a draft
in your door, nor for the shadow of the murderer above your bed.
These are restless times and you are just a wolf from a textbook,
stuffed fur on the wall of a hunting lodge, in this town
which does not resemble those you have passed through.